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BACKGROUND NOTE ON ATAURO ISLAND

Representatives of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) spent three days on the island of Atauro, approximately 15 miles north of Dili, the capital of East Timor, during a visit to East Timor from 16 to 26 February 1982. In a press conference, held in Jakarta on 4 March 1982, an ICRC delegate reported that the team had interviewed some of the 806 families comprising 3,280 people who had been sent to Atauro by the Indonesians and who were officially described as "temporarily displaced". The ICRC subsequently announced that it was launching a food and medical relief program for both the "displaced" and the native population of Atauro. (The native population of Atauro is estimated at approximately 5,000.) In addition, the ICRC has announced that it would undertake tracing activities "to facilitate the exchange of family news between people in East Timor and family members displaced on Atauro."

The Australian journalist, Peter Hastings, who accompanied the former Australian Prime Minister, Gough Whitlam, on a four-day tour of East Timor, which coincided with the ICRC visit, reported that the 806 families (comprising, according to him, 3,737 people) were taken to Atauro from the eastern part of the island after the military operation, Operasi Keamanan (Operation Security), which lasted from June to August 1981. Those transported to Atauro were described people "who had relatives among hard core Fretilin fighters and supporters in the hills", (Melbourne Age, 6 March 1982). Indonesian officials have stated that most of the East Timorese moved to Atauro had been sent there "for security reasons and some for their own protection."

According to information received by AI, a high proportion of those sent to Atauro are people suspected of having links with Fretilin, including persons with relatives said to be members of Fretilin as well as others said to be directly involved in the organization. AI believes that the majority of those now on the island were sent there, as reported above, in September 1981 following the Operasi Keamanan and that most are women and children from the eastern part of East Timor suspected of being Fretilin sympathizers because of the alleged activities of their relatives. However, AI has been receiving reports of the transportation of people to Atauro since mid-1980 when an unknown number of persons were taken there who were alleged to have participated in planning the attack on an Indonesian outpost near Dili in June of that year. Some of these persons were sent to Atauro with their families. AI received reports of the transportation to Atauro of several hundred other Timorese from the Lospalos, Baucau and Liqueca regions in December 1980 and February 1981. Those sent to Atauro between June 1980 and February 1981 were reported to be civilians suspected of being sympathetic to Fretilin rather than active guerillas. Those few persons known to AI by name who were sent to Atauro during this period were indeed engaged in civilian activities as government employees, teachers and seminarists. In one instance, a group of teachers from a high school in Baucau were sent to Atauro in February 1981 because it was alleged that the staff of the school had been communicating with Fretilin.

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The reports received by AI concerning those sent to Atauro in September 1981 indicate that they also are civilians suspected of pro-Fretilin sympathies rather than guerillas. As already noted, the majority are reported to be women and children. Most, but by no means all, come from the eastern part of East Timor. According to one report received by AI, approximately 2,300 of those sent to Atauro in September 1981 were from the eastern regions of Lospalos and Viqueque, but approximately 1,100 originated from the Baucau region and another 250 from Manatuto to the west. (The journalist, Peter Hastings, reported in March 1982 that the official Indonesian estimate of Fretilin strength was "about 130 hard core gun-carrying guerillas and perhaps 200 non-armed supporters or even family.") In addition, an unknown number of people were sent from Dili, including persons who were transferred from detention in the Dili district prison, the Comarca.

On the basis of reports received since mid-1980, AI believes that those sent to Atauro are in fact persons held against their will for alleged pro-Fretilin sympathies. The grounds for suspicion of such sympathies are, in some instances known to AI, family relationships and refusal to take up Indonesian nationality.

The programs initiated by the ICRC following their delegation's visit in February 1982 substantiate reports received earlier of conditions on Atauro. The ICRC tracing program substantiates reports that no regular communication had previously been allowed between those sent to Atauro and their relatives in other parts of East Timor. The ICRC food and medical relief programs indicate grave need of such assistance. AI had earlier received reports of shortages of foodstuffs and widespread disease and malnutrition among those held on the island. It was reported in November 1981 that persons confined on Atauro were receiving no more than one can of maize a week which they supplemented by foraging for leaves, roots and other available edible matter. Gastro-entiritis and malaria were reported to be widespread and deaths were common. While the ICRC programs may temporarily alleviate these problems, the infertility of the island and the composition of the population held there are both regarded as presenting obstacles to any hope of eventual self-sufficiency.

The ICRC delegate who spoke at the press conference held in Jakarta on 4 March 1982 after visiting East Timor was quoted as saying: "the fact that we have taken names (of the detainees held on Atauro) is a sort of life insurance for them." AI believes that the situation in which people have been held on Atauro presents them with several possible threats to their well-being.

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